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A Parametric Assessment of the Mission Applicability of Thin-Film Solar Arrays

David J. Hoffman
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August 2002

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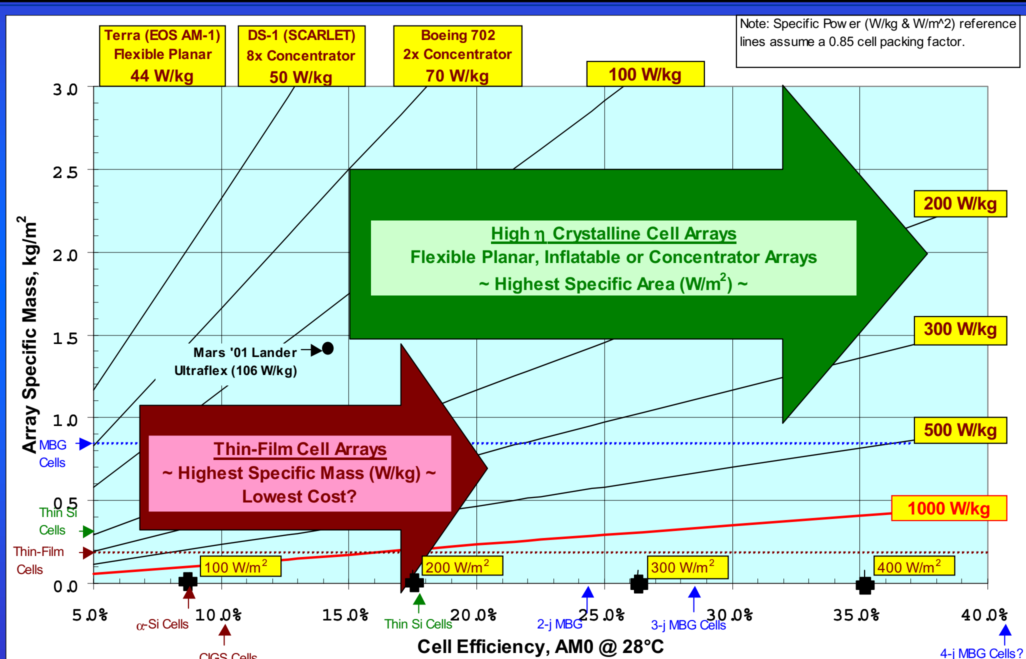
Summary

Results are presented from a parametric assessment of the applicability and spacecraft-level impacts of very lightweight thin-film solar arrays with relatively large deployed areas for representative space missions. The most and least attractive features of thin-film solar arrays are briefly discussed. A calculation is then presented illustrating that from a solar array alone mass perspective, larger arrays with less efficient but lighter thin-film solar cells can weigh less than smaller arrays with more efficient but heavier crystalline cells. However, a spacecraft-level systems assessment must take into account the additional mass associated with solar array deployed area: the propellant needed to desaturate the momentum accumulated from area-related disturbance torques and to perform aerodynamic drag makeup reboost. The results for such an assessment are presented for a representative low Earth orbit (LEO) mission, as a function of altitude and mission life, and a geostationary Earth orbit (GEO) mission. Discussion of the results includes a list of specific mission types most likely to benefit from using thin-film arrays. The presentation concludes with a list of issues to be addressed prior to use of thin-film solar arrays in space and the observation that with their unique characteristics, very lightweight arrays using efficient, thin-film cells on flexible substrates may become the best array option for a subset of Earth orbiting and deep space missions.

Photovoltaic Array Metrics

Feature	Which array technology will have the advantage?
• Low Cost	• Thin-film arrays: although still unproven.
• Low Mass	• Thin-film arrays: Highest Specific Power (W/kg) – Although large area results in a greater total mass penalty (array + propellant) for lower altitude LEO
• Packageability	• Thin-film arrays
• Deployability	•Crystalline-cell rigid panel arrays
• Small Deployed Area	• Crystalline-cell arrays: Highest Specific Area (W/m^2) + Always at least ½ the size of Thin-Film arrays?
• Reliable Performance	• Crystalline-cell arrays: long history of successful performance, but thin-film arrays show promise.
• Radiation	• Thin-film cells more tolerant
• Op. Temperature	• MJ GaAs cells have better thermal coefficient
• Hi-Voltage Capability	• Thin-film cells easier to isolate from plasma

Thin-film & crystalline cell arrays each have attractive features!



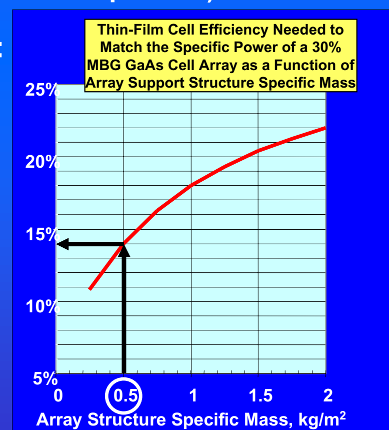
How efficient do thin-film cells have to be?

Arrays with *less efficient but lighter* thin-film cells can match the mass of arrays with *more efficient but heavier* MBG crystalline cells.

1st Order: Equate array specific power at BOL, 28° C W/kg=(W/m²) / (kg/m²)

$$\text{=>TF Cell Eff} = \text{MBG Cell Eff} \times \frac{\text{(Array Structure + TF Cell Area Sp. Mass)}}{\text{(Array Structure + MBG Cell Area Sp. Mass)}}$$

- Mass-Equivalent array with a 0.5 kg/m² structure:
  - 30% efficient 1.0 kg/m² MBG cells
  - 14% efficient 0.2 kg/m² thin-film cells



2nd Order

Support structure will be optimized for light-weight thin-film cell blankets

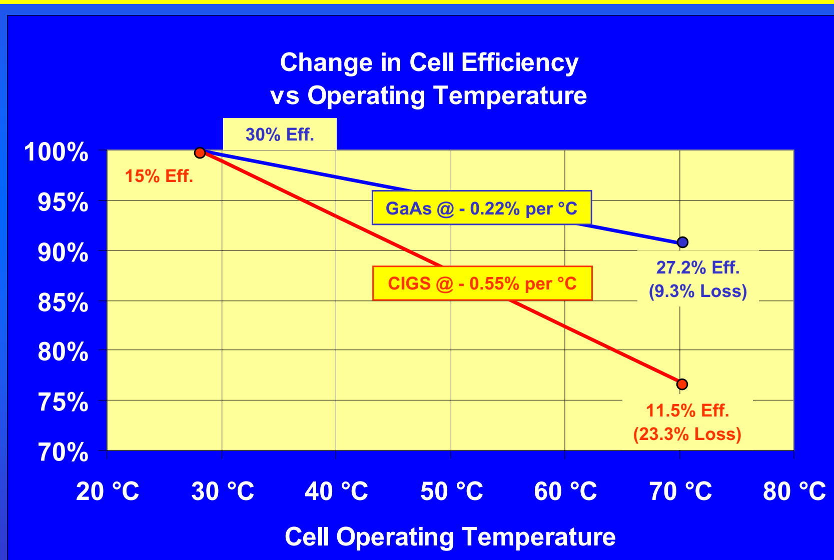
- 12% TF cells on 0.27 kg/m² structure matches the specific mass of 30% MBG cells on 0.5 kg/m² structure for arrays with same deployed stiffness.

However, to meet EOL power rqmt at max op temp

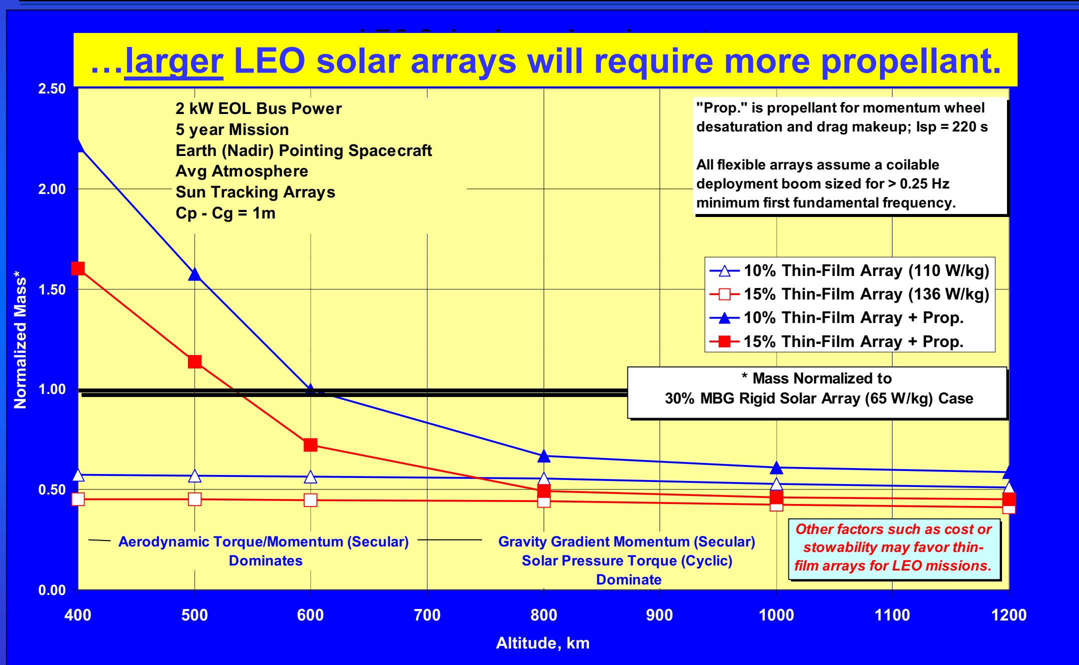
- Need 17% BOL 28°C Thin-Film cells

Solar Cell Operating Temperature

The lightweight, radiation tolerant advantage of thin-film CIGS is offset by its temperature coefficient for efficiency



Including spacecraft-level impacts…



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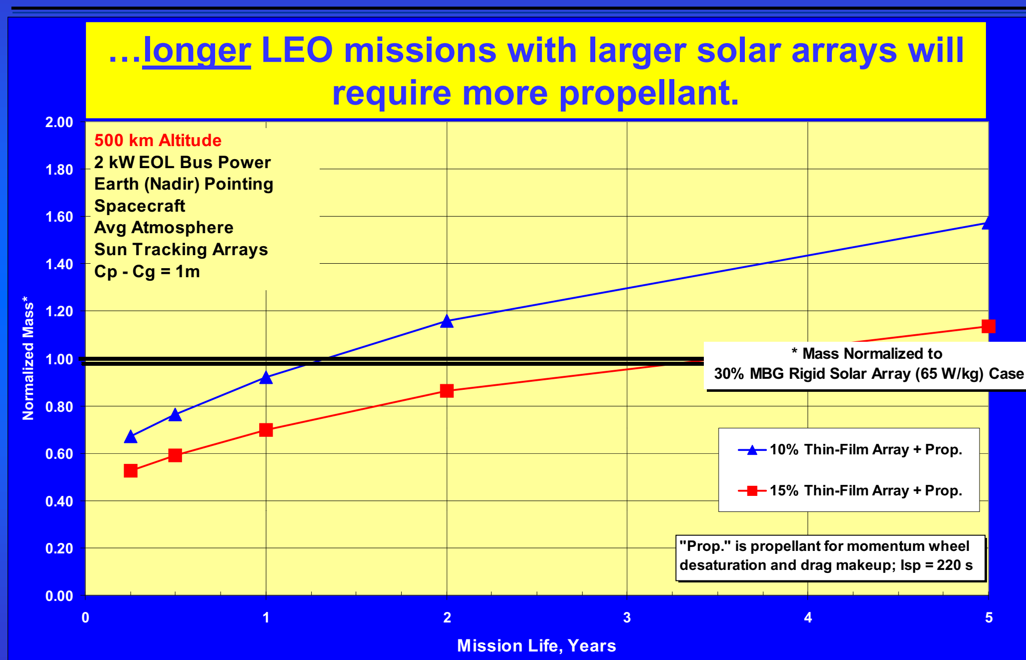
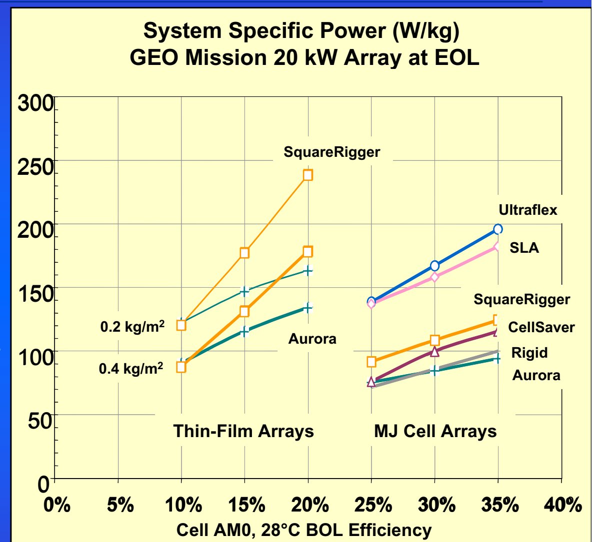
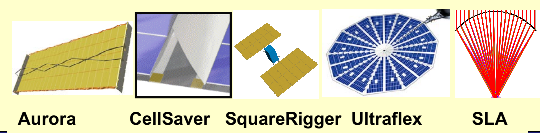


NASA/AFRL Sponsored Comprehensive Solar Array Study by AEC Able

- **Missions:**
  - LEO, MEO, GEO, SEP Transfer, Interplanetary
- **PV Cell Technologies:**
  - MJ Crystalline at 25%, 30% & 35% Eff.
  - Thin-Film at 10%, 15% & 20% Eff.; 0.2 and 0.4 kg/m²
- **Array Technologies:**
  - Rigid Panel, CellSaver, Stretched Lens Array, Aurora, Ultraflex, SquareRigger
  - Evaluation of complete systems incl. launch restraints, yokes, wire harnesses, deployment synchronization etc.
- **Environments:**
  - Deployed & Stowed Stiffness
  - Cell operating temperature
  - Radiation degradation





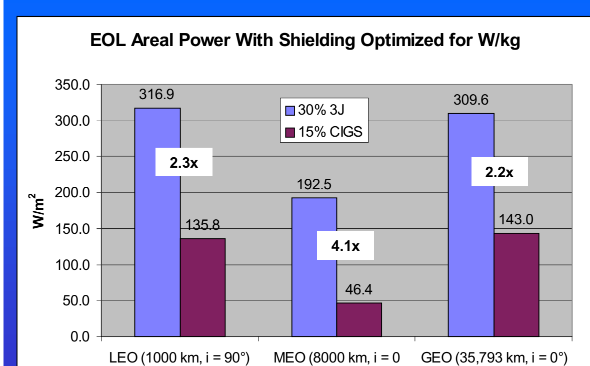
Preliminary Array Study Results

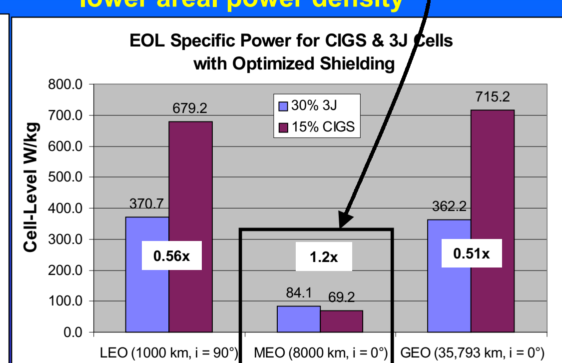
Performance of Shielded Thin-Film & 3J Crystalline PV in Various Earth Orbits

- Assumed photovoltaic only mass:
  - CIGS = 0.2 kg/m² (On 30 µm titanium foil)
  - 3J GaInP/GaAs/Ge = 0.75 kg/m² (140 µm thick Ge wafer)
  - Radiation shielding optimizes array specific power (W/kg)

Results do not include array structural support mass!

- EOL W/m² always higher for 3J cell compared to CIGS
- EOL W/kg for shielded cell higher for CIGS *except in MEO*
  - Due to on-negligible shielding and lower areal power density





Solar Array Specific Power

What's in the numerator & denominator?

Mass Specific Power W/kg	BOL		EOL	
	1 AU 28° C	1 AU Op. Temp.	1 AU 28° C	1 AU Op. Temp.
Cell Blanket (0.22 kg/m^2)				
10% CIGS	523	395	404	305
15% CIGS	785	604	605	466
Array Level				
10% CIGS	123	92	95	71
15% CIGS	193	149	149	115

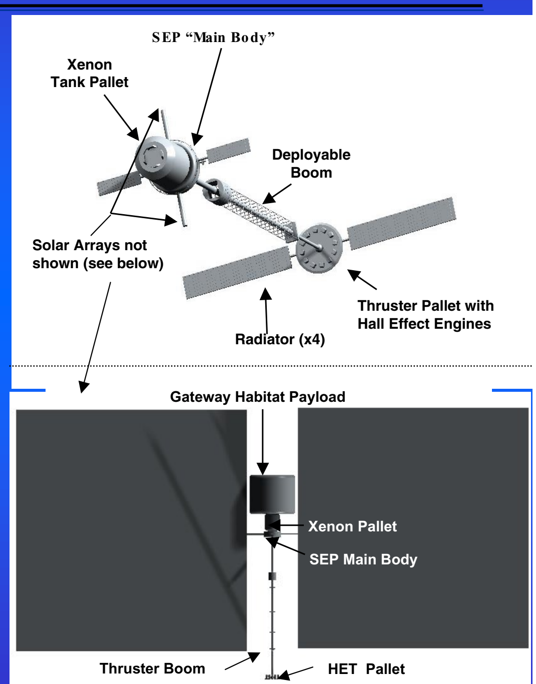
Lunar L1 "Gateway" SEP Stage

Features

- 180-day trip time, 400 km 28.5° LEO-Lunar L1
- 46-day return, Lunar L1 - 400 km 28.5° LEO
- 584 kW SEP Stage Power (2 round trips)
- 7,300 m^2 High-Voltage Thin-Film Solar Arrays (2 wings)
- 12 Direct-Drive Hall Effect 50 kW Engines (incl. 1 spare)

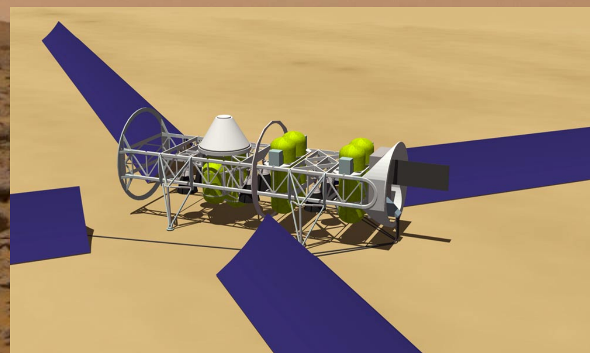
Mass Characteristics

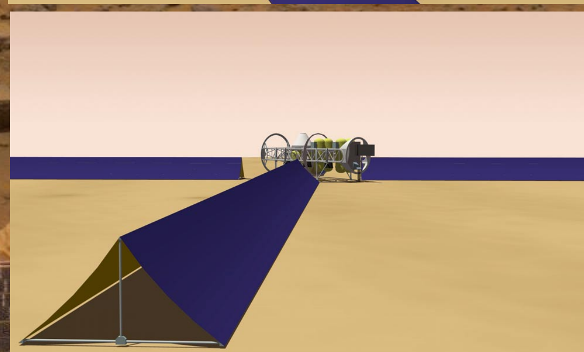
- 15.0 MT SEP Stage Dry Mass (w/ 20% margin)
- 20.0 MT Xenon propellant
- 30.0 MT Payload
- 65.0 MT Vehicle Initial Mass LEO



Far Term Thin-Film Application
Humans on Mars

- 1100-Day Surface Mission
  - Operate ISRU Plant (400-days)
  - Support Crew (500-days)
- 5000-m2, 100 kW Class Array
- Auto-Deploy Tent Structures
  - 4.5-m Height by 100-m Length
- Thin Film PV on Thin Polymer Membrane Enabling
  - Small Packaging Volume
  - Low Mass





Thin-Film Array Mission Applicability Summary

- Once designed, tested and space-qualified, very lightweight solar arrays using moderate to relatively high efficiency thin-film cells on lightweight flexible substrates will offer significant mass and cost benefits.
  - > 10% to 15% (1-Sun AM0) efficient >10-cm^2 thin-film cells with on low-mass substrates (1-mil metallic, 5-mil pre-preg composite ply, 2-mil polymer, open-weave polymer) resulting in solar cell "blankets" at 0.2 to 0.3 kg/m^2.

- Attractive Earth-Orbiting applications for Thin-Film arrays include:
  - LEO missions above 500 km to 800 km but below 4,000 km
  - LEO missions of short duration at lower altitudes
  - LEO sun-sync missions with array normal perpendicular to velocity vector
  - LEO-to-GEO transfers
  - GEO missions
  - Certain very small micro/nanosat missions

- Beyond Earth orbit applications include:
  - LEO-to-L1 SEP Transfers
  - LEO-to-? SEP Transfers
  - Large Surface Power Systems

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